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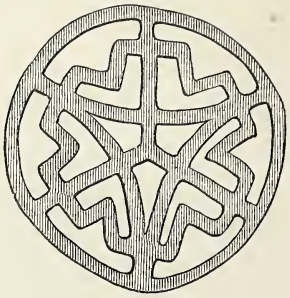

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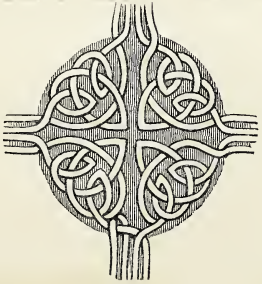

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# CHRISTIAN INSCRIPTIONS IN THE IRISH LANGUAGE.

THE inscriptions of Ireland anterior to the English invasion, have never yet been fully described or published. The largest collection of such in existence was formed by Dr. Petrie; and it is the desire of his friends that his drawings should now be published, in *facsimile*, with such additions to the collection as have been made since his death.

In the year 1822, Dr. Petrie first visited Clonmacnois, when he made drawings of a hundred and forty-three inscriptions; of which there are now but eighty-six remaining, the rest having been broken up and lost, or perhaps stolen by tourists. He made from ninety to a hundred drawings of such inscriptions, in his visits to other ecclesiastical establishments of Ireland, as St. Brecan's, of Aranmore. Some few of these are mere notes, or unfinished sketches of the stones, and fresh drawings will be required. In order to make this collection as complete as possible, all such inscriptions as are found on reliquaries, croziers, etc., such as those on the Soiscel Molaise, the Cathach of Columcille, the Cross of Cong, the Shrine of St. Patrick's Bell, and the Lismore Crozier, will be added: making in all about two hundred and fifty inscriptions.

In his evidence before the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, Dr. Petrie speaks of the deep impression made upon his mind on the occasion of his first visit to Clonmacnois, by the sight of the monumental inscriptions then existing in that place, which was the cemetery of many of the kings, bishops, and other distinguished men in Ireland, from the sixth to the twelfth century; and he adds, "those inscriptions which had never been previ-



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ously noticed, or at least explained, I found, from reference to books which I had with me at the place, presented the names of some of the most distinguished people, during that period, that figured in Irish, and some of them even in British, history. For instance, one of the first inscriptions that I copied was that of Suibhne Mac Maelhumaei, an ecclesiastic who was the most celebrated for his learning in Ireland in the ninth century, and had been invited over to England by Alfred the Great, where he obtained so much fame that his death was recorded in all the English, Saxon, and Welsh chronicles." Also, in a letter addressed to Sir Bernard Burke, on the genealogy of the O'Melaghlins, Dr. Petrie remarks—"Clonmacnois was the Iona of Ireland, or rather, Iona was the Clonmacnois of Scotland—namely, the place of sepulture of most of the royal families of the country, as the O'Melaghlins, hereditary kings of Meath, and in alternate succession with the northern O'Neills, kings of Ireland; the O'Conors, kings of Connaught; the Macarthys, of Desmond, or South Munster; the O'Kellys, of Hymanie; the MacDermots, of Moylurg, etc., etc.; of whom all those I have enumerated, with several others, had erected churches, or mortuary chapels, within the cemetery, which bore the family name, and within which none but the members of those families, respectively, were formerly allowed to be interred."

One great element of interest in this collection of the inscriptions at Clonmacnois is that we have here upwards of a hundred and seventy stones, which, being more or less arranged in sequence, form a complete series, ranging from the seventh down to the twelfth century, showing the gradual development and progress of the art of palæography and of sculpture in Ireland, and which may thus serve as a key to the approximate date of such works elsewhere in the British Islands. Many of these stones seem to have been identified, and this identification rendered more or less certain by bringing three forms of evidence to bear on each stone; first, the identification of the name in the Annals; second, the

study of the palæographical and philological forms and peculiarities observable in the inscriptions themselves; thirdly, the amount of artistic power displayed, and the growth and development of certain designs at certain periods.

Having, then, this series to start from, we can form some estimate of the date of other examples of sculpture in Ireland, always allowing for the superior skill in art which would naturally be exhibited in so central a school of learning as that of Clonmacnois, when compared with the wild and lonely regions of Kerry, or the desert rocks of the islands of the Atlantic.

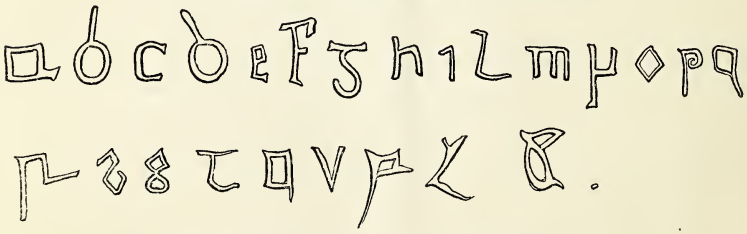
In the first place it must be stated that this work consists merely of those inscriptions which are written in the localised Roman, or, as it is popularly called, the Irish character, *all* of which obviously belong to the Christian Age; therefore, those which are in the Ogham or occult characters, and which have such a peculiar interest from the uncertainty which as yet attends their history, will have no place in this volume, excepting where they occur in company with the Roman letter. One example of such has been found at Clonmacnois on the stone marked *Colman bocht*, the latter word, which means *poor*, being in the Ogham character. Another is that at Kilfountain, near Dingle, in Kerry, the stone of Finten, who founded the church in that district A.D. 683. However, the most interesting of these particular stones is that discovered by the Rev. Mr. Shearman at Killeen Cormac, in the County of Wicklow, the inscription, in Roman characters, on which is IVVERI DRVIDES; and the *Ogham* has been read "Duftanos Saei Sahattos," meaning "Duftan Chief Sage." So that it is supposed to be the tomb of the chief Druid of King Laery (Laeghaire) Duftach, whose conversion by St. Patrick, A.D. 455, is described in the ancient life of that Saint by Muirchu Maccumachtheni, written towards the close of the seventh century.

In two of these inscriptions the form of the lettering is that of the Roman uncial, the letter S being in the

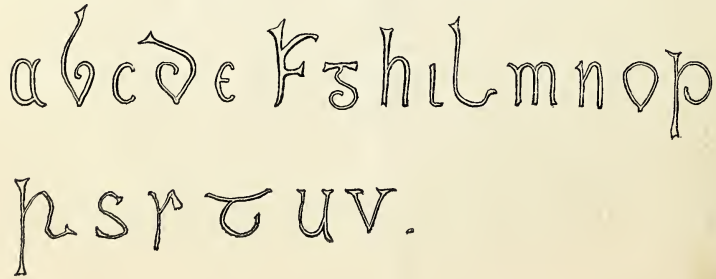
form of the figure 8. As we advance towards the eighth century we have more varieties, particularly in the letters A, D, N, and O. These may all be classed under two terms, angular, or round, the rudeness or perfection of the rounding seeming to vary more with the degree of skill in the artist than with the period, whether early or late, of the stone. N is sometimes shaped like h or u. The lozenge-shaped O on the Roscommon inscription, and on the stone of Cholumbon, A.D. 652, as well as on the Ardagh chalice, is characteristic of seventh century work in Anglo-Saxon art. It occurs in the Ruthwell cross in the word *adoramus*.

The letters A and U are so often formed alike that mistakes have occurred in consequence in the reading of certain inscriptions where these letters are used. Bonait has been read Bonuit, and Cathail has been read Cathuil on the stone of Corpre MacAthail at Glendalough. This accident has occurred from the partial erasing of the top line of the A in many instances. In the same way S and F may be often confused, from the disappearance or indistinctness of the central cross stroke of the F.

1.—ALPHABET OF THE SEVENTH CENTURY.



2.—ALPHABET OF THE ELEVENTH CENTURY.



As we advance from the ninth to the twelfth centuries no very important change in the actual form of the letters takes place, but their gradual growth in grace and dignity is very striking. The beautiful heart-shaped D, so often seen in the book of Kells, first appears on the stones of the early part of the tenth century, while the o is long and graceful, and pointed at the bottom. A comparison between the forms of the letters on the Abecedarium stone at Kilmalkedar, and the stone of Joseph at Roscommon (see alphabet 1), with the noble forms of those in the twelfth century of Maelmighel and Maeliohn ēps, A.D. 1172 (see alphabet 2), will at once bear testimony to the progress, not only in execution, but in dignity and refinement of feeling, which was being carried on up to that period.

While the various shapes of the letters thus illustrate the history of writing in this country, the philologist may discover some interesting declensional forms in the inscriptions, simple, and in but few words, as they are. O'Donovan, in his grammar, and the editor of Cormac's *Glossary*, in his notes to that work, quote some of these Irish inscriptions as offering the most correct examples of certain philological forms, such as the aspiration of certain letters, a grammatical peculiarity, the general use of which distinguishes the Irish Gaelic, and other cognate dialects, from all modern languages; or such a singular form as that found in the very ancient inscription before mentioned at Roscommon, where we have an instance of what O'Donovan terms "eclipsis", or "the suppression of the sounds of certain radical consonants by prefixing others of the same organ"; but which Zeuss (*Gram. Celt.*, i, p. 200) more correctly describes as a change in the first letters of words following pronouns, prepositions, or particles, terminating with the letter *n*.

The various forms of the symbol of the cross which appear on these Irish tombstones, and the gradual development of artistic feeling shown in the series from the seventh to the eleventh century, is the next point of interest in the collection. Of the earlier Christian symbols

found in the catacombs we have scarcely any example in this country. The anchor, symbol of Hope,—the dove, of the Holy Spirit, the palm leaf, emblem of Peace, are never found engraved on the Irish stones, while the ship, emblematic of the Church of Christ, has only been found carved in the soffit of a window in the Round Tower at Roscrea; and the fish, symbol both of Christ and the Christian—which De Rossi tells us never appears as a symbol in Christian art in Italy after the fifth century—occurs but once in this country, on a stone probably of the eighth century, that of Oidacan, at Fuerty, in the County of Roscommon. The cross, Dr. Northcote tells us, is neither the earliest nor the most common of Christian symbols, and the Abbé Martigny adds that no monument of certain date presents us with either a Greek or a Latin cross before the fifth century. It is possible that, in the first and the persecuted period of the Church, this sign could not be freely exposed to public gaze, and one of the first places in which we meet with it is in a loculus in the lowest floor of the crypt of St. Lucina, where a simple Greek cross appears, with an inscription; and, in bas-reliefs, on the early Christian sarcophagi representing the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the bread is inscribed with this mark of the cross within the circle, which is also seen on a cake represented in one of the great illuminated pages of the Book of Kells. It seems, in fact, to have been a baker's mark of great antiquity, such as is found to have been put on the ancient Egyptian bread.

When it is remembered that Christianity was introduced into Ireland between the fourth and fifth centuries, and that the first monuments of Christian art date from the sixth and seventh centuries, it is an interesting fact that this cross within the circle is that which is found on the oldest stones in Ireland, and we have one authentic example of such a cross being carved on a rock in St. Patrick's time. This interesting memorial is near the Church of Kilmore, in the County of Mayo, at a place called Lia na Manach. The creation of this cross is described in the Acts of Patrick by Tire-

chan preserved in the Book of Armagh, folio 15; and its situation is clearly pointed out in the Tripartite life of that saint. Among the earliest and rudest looking of our inscribed stones are those of Kilmalkedar, Gallarus, Kilfountain, and Reask, which are all decorated with the cross within the circle. So also with one of the oldest stones in Aran, "Sancti Brecani," but that in this one, which appears to be of later date, a further development is seen in the introduction of a smaller circle in the centre, where the cross-lines intersect.

1

A.D. 450 to 500.

2

500 to 600.

3

600.

An ornamental design of much interest in the history of Celtic art is found on the Abecedarium stone in Kerry. It is a spiral ornament at the ends of the shaft and arms of the cross, which seems to have been a common form in the north of Italy, a few examples of which may be seen on monuments in Ravenna, Torcello, and San Ambrogio at Milan. The first dated example of this design which we have in Ireland is in the stone of Ternohc Macceran, at Kilnasaggart, who died A.D. 716, but many crosses are still standing in Aran, Innismurray, Inniscealtra, and Limerick, which are thus decorated.

4

5

A.D. 600 to 700.

In No. 6, the cross on the tomb of Forcos, about the beginning of the eighth century, we see a curious modification of the form of the cross with the circle, shewing a transition from the Greek to the Irish cross, which latter form seems almost the only one in use in the eighth century. Many new crosses appear to have been introduced between the years 800 and 900, some of which are mere geometrical patterns, evidently soon

rejected, as they deserved to be, for their want of beauty in design, such as Nos. 7 and 8, the stones of Orthanach, who died A.D. 809; and Blaithmac, who died 891; and Jerome (No. 9), which last is more interesting than the former, since it would seem to symbolise at once the doctrine of the Unity and Trinity with that of the cross; the circle, the cross, and the triangle, being all therein combined.

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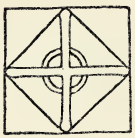

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A curious variety, which seems to belong to this period, is found very often in the islands off the west coast of Ireland. It has two, and sometimes three arms; the widest being at the top, instead of the bottom as in the

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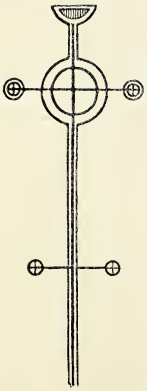

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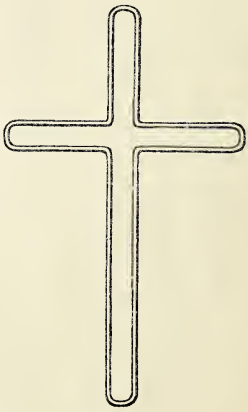

papal cross and the patriarchal cross of the Holy Sepulchre. This example (No. 10) comes from the tomb of Tighernac in Aran. The plain Latin cross is also sometimes seen on stones of the ninth century, such as

those of Finnachtu (No. 11), King of Leinster, who died A.D. 848, and Cen[nedig] (No. 12). This form first appears in Italy, on a coin issued by Galla Placidia, in the year 451. A great stride forward seems to have been made in sculpture from the end of the ninth to the eleventh century, and the increase of grace and beauty of form in the crosses themselves was equal to that of the letters and ornamental design in the work which accompanied them. One glance at the outline of the crosses of Maelphatric, Maelfinnia (abbot of Clonmacnois), and Odran hua Eolais (scribe of Clonmacnois), who all died in the tenth century, will shew at once that such work may, indeed, belong to the same period of art-development as the great crosses of Clonmacnois and Monasterboice, erected at that time.

A few words may now be added on the different forms of ornamental designs found upon these stones.

With the exception of the zigzag or chevron, and the trumpet-pattern, no design found on the carved stones of *pagan* Ireland bears the least resemblance to the ornamental work of *Christian* Ireland in the ninth century; and even in the case of these two exceptions, the resemblance is little more than in name, as few could see much similarity between the chevron design in Norman architecture and the rude zigzags on the stones in the interior of New Grange. So also with the trumpet-pattern. There seem to be two distinct developments of this design,—one pagan, such as is seen on our ancient bronze utensils; and the other Christian, as in the divergent spirals of the illuminated MSS. of the seventh and eighth centuries, and the oldest of our shrines or other ecclesiastical relics, as well as on the sculptured stones of the ninth and tenth centuries.

The next ornamental design which occurs about this period seems to be of foreign extraction. It is the so-called Greek fret, or gammadion, two examples of which are here given (Nos. 13, 14) from the stones of Findan and Maelan, who, if rightly identified with similar names occurring in the annals, died A.D. 800, 848. This latter

design, which is of common occurrence in our illuminated MSS. and other monuments of our ancient art, cannot be said to be in any particular way characteristic of this art. It is found, at a very early period, in various countries and among various races, from Yucatan, China, and Egypt, down to the Byzantine period in Europe.

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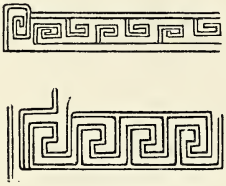

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16

865 to 950.

But the art-instinct of the Celtic people gave birth to varieties and modifications of this design which are met with in the work of no other people; and by throwing the lines diagonally, which in the original are at right angles, they made that beautiful pattern so common in its various changes and singular forms on all our ancient monuments. The first example of this design, in this collection, is seen on the stone of Fechtnach, who died A.D. 866 (see figs. 15, 16, 17, 18).

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18

To this period also belong those stones which shew the first examples of the use of animal forms in sculp-

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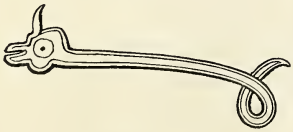
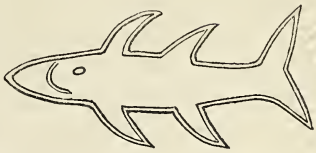


20

ture. On the stone of Cobthac, abbot of Clonmacnois, who died A.D. 807, that curious, lizard-like animal (fig. 19)

is three times represented, which was such a favourite among our old scribes, who never ceased to delight in curling and plaiting its long tail. The dog's head (fig. 20) is found on a small fragment lately discovered by the Rev. James Graves at the Nunnery Church, Clonmacnois; and the fish (fig. 21) is seen on the stone of Oidacan, at Fuerty in the county of Roscommon.

21



The use of the fish among the early Christians of Italy as a sign of the name of Christ began to die out in Italy in the third century, and ceased altogether in the fifth, when we must suppose it found its way into Ireland. It occurs more or less frequently in the Books of Kells and of Armagh, and Mr. Stuart tells us it is on eleven of the stones of Scotland, so that we may naturally feel surprise at finding it on only one stone in this collection. Indeed the use of symbols as such, and unconnected with ornamental design, never seems to have been in favour in Ireland, and no examples of those forms, so common in Scotland, of the spectacle ornament, the elephant, the mirror, etc., are found in our art.

From the tenth to the twelfth century the Irish seem to have excelled in the art of stone sculpture, and the date of the crosses of Clonmacnois, and Monasterboice, and Tuam, having been fixed by Dr. Petrie as belonging to the years 916, 923, and 1128, it is natural to suppose that crosses of a similar character, scattered through Ireland, belong to the same period. Of the ornamental designs most commonly found on these crosses, the examples figs. 22 to 28 are among the most interesting. The triquetra, as this form of knot is called, is doubtless symbolical of the Trinity (figs. 22*a*, *b*), and in such a design as the latter, where we find a circle enclosing four triquetras interlaced, and forming a cross, occurring, as it does, on monuments of pictorial and metallurgic art of the period between the years 900 and 950, and

on tombstones still lying in the burial ground of Clonmacnois, such as that of Maelfinnia, who died A.D. 991, or Odran hu Eolais, the scribe of Clonmacnois, who died in the year 994, and at Glendalough on the stone of Diarmait at Glendalough, A.D. 955, we may conclude that such other examples as occur on stones which cannot be identified, belong to about the same period.

It now remains to be seen whether the conclusions as to date, arrived at by the study of the gradations in the forms of the letters and of the crosses, correspond with the period to be assigned to these stones by the identification of the names inscribed with persons mentioned in the Annals as connected with Clonmacnois.

The extreme simplicity of form in these inscriptions, although beautiful from its harmony with the unostentatious and humble piety of the early Christian Church, being, as in almost all cases, merely the request for a prayer or a blessing on the soul of the being who sleeps beneath, yet prevents their being of the same historic value as if they contained a more detailed account of those whose names they commemorate; and though Clonmacnois is more fortunate than many of the religious houses of Ireland, in having preserved a list, more or less perfect, of its abbots, yet, unfortunately, the brevity of our early annals is such that, in addition to their names, parentage, and race, we seldom learn anything further than the years in which they died.

However, the fact of the mere identification of the *names* of a certain number of the abbots, scribes, and bishops, which identification is supported by the testimony brought to bear on the question of their date by palæographical and artistic observation, is an important one, and a still fuller historic interest may be found to exist in some instances.

Two of the finest and most perfectly ornamented stones at Clonmacnois are those of celebrated scribes, Odran hu a Eolais, and Suibhne Mac Maelhumaei. This epithet of scribe, Dr. Petrie tells us, is not to be understood in the simple literal sense, as signifying a writer

or transcriber, in which it was first used, but in that wider meaning of both writer and author which grew out of the frequent union of these characters in the same individual.

These stones, along with the great standing crosses, are works of a period when Clonmacnois seemed to enjoy unwonted peace and security, when her ancient edifices were restored, and some of her new ones created —from the last devastations and robberies of the Danes under Turgesius, in the beginning of the ninth century, up to the renewed invasion of the barbarians in the commencement of the tenth.

In the eleventh century we have the stone of Fechtnach, a learned reader and priest of Cluain, abbot of Hy, and afterwards abbot of all Ireland. This stone may have been raised to his memory, as he died in Rome, A.D. 1024, whither he had gone on a pilgrimage.

At this period the family of Conn na-mbocht, or "Conn, the father of the poor," and head of the Hospital of Clonmacnois, held distinguished places in the establishment of Clonmacnois. Conn was descended from Gorman, abbot of Louth, who, in the year 753, came to perform pilgrimage at Clonmacnois; and who, having feasted on bread and water at St. Finnen's Well for a whole year, died and was interred there.

Seven tombstones were found by Dr. Petrie at Clonmacnois, the names inscribed on which are identical with those of members of this family, and six of which are marked by the same form of cross, with identically the same ornamental design carved in the central circle, from which the shaft and arms of the cross spring. The first of this series is the stone of Dunadach, lector of Clonmacnois, its anmchara, or soul-friend (the beautiful Irish name for father confessor), and afterwards the head of its rule and history. He died A.D. 953, and was named the senior of the race of Conn na-mbocht. The next stone is inscribed "Or' do Chunn" (pray for Conn), and is marked with the same cross which follows in the whole series. The third bears the name of Maelfinnia,

the son of Conn "of the poor," who was bishop of Clonmacnois, and died in the year 1056. The fourth stone marks the grave of another son, Maelciaran, who was Airchinnech, or steward, of the hospital of St. Ciaran in 1072; he was called "the principal saint of Cluain, and head of the religion of all Ireland in his time." The fifth stone is that of Maelmaire, who was the author of the Annals of Cluain, the compiler or transcriber of the Leabhar na-huidre, in which he is mentioned as the son of Conn na-mbocht (O'Curry's Lectures, p. 138). The sixth stone is that of Gillachrist, son of Conn na-mbocht, called in the Annals the best ecclesiastical student that was in Ireland in his time, the glory and ornament of Clonmacnois. He died in the year 1085.

And the last name belonging to this family, which we we can hope to identify, is that of the Bishop Thomas O'Cuin, who died in 1279. He was a Franciscan friar, confirmed by King Henry III on the 20th of February, 1252—English style. He filled the episcopal chair for twenty-seven years. The see was afterwards vacant two years. During the next two centuries, the period of the Anglo-Norman invasion, Clonmacnois was gradually shorn of her ancient splendour and renown.

However, it may be said, in conclusion, that the principal merit of this collection is that, when taken together, they are found to form a well marked national class in the great collection of Christian inscriptions, and the art which accompanies them is essentially Irish. Much has been said and written to prove the identity of the schools which produced the Scotch, the so-called Anglo-Saxon, the Manx, and the Welsh sculptured stones, with the Irish. In all, we do indeed find the same ornamental material used, interlacings, trumpet patterns, diagonal patterns, serpents, etc.; but this similarity in detail proves nothing further than inter-communication. So total a dissimilarity of spirit and feeling for art exists in the works of these different countries, that it becomes impossible to conceive their productions as belonging to the same school. It would be difficult to find two works

of art more different in character than the simple and chaste form of the cross to Maelfinnia, and the rude and barbarous extravagance of the Scotch slab at Halkirk in Caithness.[1] Something more than archæology is required to perceive this. To the mere archæologian antiquity is everything, and art nothing, but the mind of the great man who formed this collection was one of wider grasp, and such a mind as his is required to perceive the qualities which form the essential elements and the individuality of Irish art. It is not in the quantity, it is not even in the nature of ornamental detail, that true merit lies, it is in its use, and in that indefinable quality which, for want of a better word, we term feeling. It is unreasonable to call sculpture, however perfect, which is merely encrusted on an object, ornament.[2] Decoration is beautiful only when found in its right place, when adding to the effect of the fundamental form to be adorned; and when held in subordination and subjection to the primary idea, a noble reserve of power is felt to exist, which comes forth at the right time, and in the right place, to aid in the expression of the essential elements of the subject, emphasising its important points, and adding clearness to the beauty of its outline.

These qualities in the mind of the Irish artist, visible more in the smaller initial letters of the Book of Kells than in the greater illuminated pages, more in these simple sepulchral slabs than in the greater crosses, of a just appreciation of the right application of ornament, of a temperate and wisely governed delight in it, united to delicate and tender execution, were remarked by Mr. Ruskin, in his late visit to Dublin, as strikingly prominent in many of the architectural works in the present day in Ireland.

In conclusion, Dr. Petrie draws our attention to the form in which these inscriptions are worded, and the

[1] See *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (Stuart), vol. ii, pl. 79, p. 40.
[2] See "Treatment of Ornament," *The Stones of Venice*, vol. i, pp. 230, 251.

amount of interest that belongs to them, as evidence of the widespread faith that has left its mark on the very rocks and stones yet lying on "the green hills of holy Ireland," and also of the peculiar phase of Christian feeling, of which our art, taken as a whole, is expressive, as differing in its tone from that of the catacombs. In the infancy of the Christian Church all other thoughts seemed lost in the new assurance of faith in a happy resurrection; the first "great joy" with which we are told the disciples returned to Jerusalem when they had seen their Lord carried up into heaven had not yet subsided, and so all the symbols that spoke of this faith, all the art that sprang from it, told only of hope, of peace, of rest, and even of rejoicing, in the thought of death. The emblems of the passion and the crucifixion were as yet unknown, but as time passed on, as was observed by a late writer on art in the *Quarterly Review*, other seed was sown, and began to bear fruit in solemn forms and strange meanings, which tell of the changes in kingdoms, and the infusion of new races. The mysticism of a mythology engendered under ruder skies, seemed, as it were, to give birth to other forms in art among the northern races, and other and sadder phases of Christian feeling, and so a decorative art also arose, which is thus described by one of the Benedictine authors of the *Nouveau Traité Diplomatique*, "Les ornements des lettres grises Anglo-saxonnes semblent n'être le fruit que d'imaginations atroces et mélancoliques, jamais d'idées riantes, tout se ressent de la dureté du climat." Designs that seem an effort to express, as to create, a sense of difficulty, and a something incomprehensible, though not confused, in their entangled coils and infinite windings, in their strange knottings and network, forming, indeed, fit symbols of the inexplicable mystery of our faith and of our life. And in their sepulchral art, not the palm-leaf, or the dove, or the anchor, with the words requiescit in pace, or dormivit, are to be seen, but the cross, and the sadder, though still faithful, prayer for intercession.